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PROMOTING CULTURAL IDENTITY THROUGH TRADITIONAL MUSIC IN PRIMARY SCHOOL MUSIC CURRICULUM: A CURRICULUM STANDARDS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates how the Malaysian primary school music curriculum integrates traditional music elements to promote cultural identity. With Malaysia's multicultural composition and the Ministry of Education's emphasis on nurturing unity through heritage, this study explores the representation of traditional music in curriculum standards, the pedagogical approaches recommended, and the extent to which these align with fostering cultural identity. Employing a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) guided by the PRISMA framework, relevant studies published between 2019 and 2025 were sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, eight studies focusing on Malaysian music education and cultural identity were selected for thematic analysis using Clarke and Braun's six-step method. Three main themes emerged: (1) traditional music as a vehicle for multicultural awareness, (2) curriculum-driven pedagogies for heritage transmission, and (3) challenges in implementation due to resource gaps and teacher preparedness. The analysis reveals that while the curriculum strongly endorses traditional music, implementation varies across regions and schools. Findings underscore the need for targeted teacher training, integration of community musicians in schools, and the development of culturally relevant teaching materials. The study offers practical recommendations for policymakers and educators aiming to strengthen cultural identity through music education in Malaysia.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Identity, Traditional Music, Music Curriculum, Malaysia, Primary Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalised educational environment, the preservation and reinforcement of cultural identity among younger generations have become critical priorities for educators and policymakers. The interconnectedness brought about by global media, migration, and technology exposes children to a vast array of cultural influences, which, while enriching, can also lead to the gradual erosion of local traditions and values (Wheatley, 2024). For multicultural nations such as Malaysia, this concern is particularly salient. Malaysia's national identity is shaped by the coexistence of multiple ethnic groups—primarily Malay, Chinese and Indian communities—each with distinct languages, customs, artistic expressions, and belief systems. This rich cultural tapestry offers unique educational opportunities but also demands thoughtful policies to ensure that global influences do not overshadow local heritage.

Cultural identity is broadly understood as the shared sense of belonging that develops through the intergenerational transmission of language, customs, arts, and heritage (Ivanova, 2023). It is both a personal and collective construct, influencing how individuals see themselves in relation to their community and the nation at large. Among various forms of cultural expression, music holds a particularly powerful position.

As an art form that intertwines emotion, memory, and communal participation, music has historically served as a repository of cultural memory, preserving narratives and transmitting values across generations (Popescu, Schiavio & Haiduk, 2024). Traditional music, in particular, encapsulates a society's aesthetic sensibilities, social history, and worldview, making it an essential component of cultural education.

The Malaysian primary school curriculum is structured under the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR), which details content and assessment standards, explicitly underscoring the role of traditional music in promoting unity and mutual respect among the nation's diverse ethnic communities (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2016). The KSSR mandates exposure to a variety of musical forms—*dikir barat*, *gamelan*, *kompang*, Chinese opera, Indian classical music, and indigenous traditions—as a way to foster appreciation of Malaysia's pluralistic heritage (Abdullah *et al.*, 2024). The intent is to cultivate both pride in one's own cultural roots and respect for the traditions of others, contributing to broader goals of social cohesion as outlined in the Rukun Negara.

However, questions remain about how effectively these curriculum standards are implemented in practice and whether they achieve the intended outcomes of fostering a deep-rooted cultural identity among students. Although policy reports outline lofty objectives, classroom reality may depict a different scene. Past studies emphasize the need to incorporate traditional music in school curricula for enhancing cultural sustainability (Ong, 2025). However, various challenges have been pinpointed. These are a shortage of teacher competence in non-Western musical genres, inadequate access to culturally true teaching materials, and reduced exposure to the wide range of Malaysia's musical heritage (Sun & Wong, 2024). Also, differences in school infrastructure overall compound inequalities in the access to quality cultural education (Ismail *et al.*, 2022).

In light of these shortcomings, it is important to critically evaluate the inclusion of traditional music within the Malaysian primary school music curriculum and to what extent it reflects the general aim of fostering cultural identity. This research fills in the above gaps by performing a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) of studies regarding traditional music in Malaysian primary education.

Informed by the PRISMA protocol, the research synthesizes evidence from new qualitative scholarship to assess the strengths of the curriculum, search for limitations, and investigate pedagogical methods that facilitate the transmission of heritage. By prioritizing curriculum standards and their real-world implications, this study seeks to inform educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers regarding effective strategies for the development of cultural identity through music education. This systematic review offers a consolidated and critical perspective on traditional music in Malaysian primary education, highlighting its cultural and pedagogical significance in ways that extend beyond previous individual studies.

1.1. Research Objectives

- To examine the representation and integration of traditional music within Malaysian primary school music curriculum standards.
- To identify pedagogical strategies outlined in curriculum standards for embedding traditional music in classroom practice.
- To evaluate the alignment between curriculum provisions for traditional music and the intended aim of strengthening students' cultural identity.

1.2. Research Questions

- How do the Malaysian primary school music curriculum standards incorporate traditional music elements to promote cultural identity?
- What pedagogical approaches are recommended in curriculum standards for integrating traditional music into classroom instruction?
- To what extent do existing curriculum guidelines align with the broader goal of fostering cultural identity among primary school students?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Cultural Identity in Multicultural Education

Cultural identity is commonly understood to be a dynamic and complex construct, influenced both by inherited patterns and ongoing engagement with social institutions. For Malaysia, this identity involves not just ethnic and linguistic heritage but a broader sense of national belonging as expressed in the Rukun Negara. This national philosophy prioritises values like unity, loyalty, and respect for diversity that fit well with the goals of cultural education in schools (Anuar, 2025). In theoretical multicultural education, Mollah and Nurhayati (2022) identified the dual functions of enhancing cultural pluralism and social cohesion. Schools are challenged with teaching students to appreciate and understand their own cultural heritage as they learn to engage positively with those of other backgrounds. Music education is a highly effective medium in meeting such goals because it has the capacity to communicate meaning beyond language and cultural differences (Odena, 2020).

Academics like McKoy and Lind (2022) advocate for culturally responsive pedagogy, where teaching methods take cues from the cultural background of students.

In Malaysia, this is particularly pertinent as Malay, Chinese and Indian traditions coexist. Music provides a means to learn about this diversity, where students can experience heritage as both experiential and participatory and not abstract in nature. Additionally, studies from other multicultural societies like Singapore and New Zealand indicate that music education that is based on several sources of culture boosts students' empathy and intercultural competence (Crawford, 2020).

Thus, cultural identity in Malaysian primary schools is not a solitary individual characteristic but a part of an ongoing, collective social entity. Educators are faced with the challenge of constructing curriculum and pedagogy that

simultaneously maintains the distinctiveness of every tradition and serves to build common national values.

2.2. Traditional Music as a Pedagogical Tool

Malaysian traditional music comprises a diversity of types, each rooted in the cultural practices of the community from which it originates. These include *dikir barat*, choral performance art tradition of Kelantan; *gamelan*, ensemble music with origins in Malay royal court tradition; *kompong*, frame drum ensemble played at public events and weddings; *nobat*, ceremonial court music; Chinese opera music with its highly elaborate vocal and instrumental types; and Indian classical traditions like *bharatanatyam* accompaniment (Musa, A., Musa, R. M. & Hashim, 2021). Indigenous communities in Sabah and Sarawak contribute additional rich musical repertoires, such as the *sape* of the Orang Ulu and *sumazau* dance music of the Kadazan-Dusun (Shah, 2021).

Embedding these musical forms in school curricula does more than provide aesthetic enjoyment—it serves as a means of cultural transmission. As Guo, Zhang and Sun (2024) note, participation in traditional music enables students to embody the rhythms, melodies, and performance practices that carry cultural narratives and values. The process of learning through doing—singing, playing, and moving—allows for the internalisation of heritage in a way that purely cognitive instruction cannot achieve.

Fay, Mawson and Bithell (2022), in their studies on intercultural music education, emphasise that engagement with traditional music creates opportunities for students to encounter the “other” in a safe and creative space.

In Malaysia, which has mixed cultural heritage, such encounters can cultivate empathy and respect between communities. In addition, the process of learning about each other's musical traditions can dismantle cultural myths, reduce prejudice, and enhance social ties among multicultural students (Min & Abdullah, 2024).

Globally, there are also similar advantages. For example, research from Canada's school music for aboriginal children has found that incorporating community-based music within the curriculum supports increased self-concept in students and developing cross-cultural awareness in children (Sunderland et al., 2024).

These findings affirm that indigenous music is not merely an extra curriculum enrichment activity but a core element of a culture-friendly curriculum.

2.3. Curriculum Standards and Heritage Transmission

The Dokumen Standard Kurikulum dan Pentaksiran curriculum for music in the primary schools of Malaysia defines specifically the function played by traditional music to promote cultural identity and harmony with one another (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2016). The report requires exposure to a vast range of forms of music typical of the majority ethnic groups, and learning through active engagement. The repertoire activities also involve singing the traditional works, traditional instruments playing, dance and movement, and learning about the cultural histories of the repertoire.

The KSSR focus supports the overall objectives of the National Education Philosophy, which seeks to produce well-rounded individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally, and physically well-balanced. Through the inclusion of traditional music in the curriculum, policymakers hope to instil such values as respect for one another, cooperation, and pride in heritage.

However, Min and Abdullah (2024), identify a significant gap between the intentions expressed in curriculum documents and the realities of classroom implementation. Their research shows that while teachers acknowledge the importance of traditional music, many lack the necessary skills, resources, and confidence to teach it effectively. In some cases, teachers default to Western art music, for which they have received more training, leading to a narrowing of cultural exposure for students.

Moreover, curriculum standards face the challenge of balancing breadth and depth. While the inclusion of multiple traditions reflects Malaysia's diversity, it can also result in superficial engagement with each if time and resources are limited. Scholars such as Martínez-Delgado (2019) caution that tokenistic representation of cultural forms risks reducing them to stereotypes, undermining their educational value.

In practice, the effective transmission of heritage through the curriculum depends on the availability of culturally authentic teaching materials, teacher training that encompasses multiple traditions, and opportunities for students to interact with culture-bearers from their communities (Chaiwanichsiri, 2025). Without these supports, the goals outlined in the KSSR risk remaining aspirational rather than operational.

2.4. Challenges in Implementation

Despite the clear curricular mandate, several persistent challenges hinder the effective integration

of traditional music into Malaysian primary schools.

Many rural schools lack the instruments and facilities necessary to teach traditional music effectively. Xuan and Fitri bin Mohamad Haris (2025) indicate that whereas city schools are more likely to be equipped with instruments like gamelan sets or kompang drums, rural and remote schools may use improvised materials or forgo practical elements altogether.

This inequality not only restricts learners' learning opportunities but also perpetuates cultural education inequalities across geographies. Most Malaysian music teachers receive their training in Western art music traditions and do not get much exposure to local and regional repertoires (Wong & Chiu, 2016). This lack of training impacts confidence and competence in teaching traditional music. Without formal avenues of professional development in this field, teachers will be discouraged from teaching unfamiliar traditions or teach them in simplified forms.

Whereas Malay traditional music is well-represented in textbooks and teaching materials, the musical cultures of the indigenous people and certain minority groups are less prominent (Tiwari & Darbari, 2025).

Such imbalance can create a hierarchy of cultural value, privileging certain traditions while marginalizing others, thereby undermining the curriculum's inclusive intentions. Music teaching time in the main curriculum is restricted, frequently being pushed out by other study priorities. It is possible for teachers to favour examinable material or more experienced repertoires, with decreased contact with traditional music as a consequence.

Parents and communities might undervalue traditional music in certain instances, and it seems less important to them as a future career option for students than STEM education or proficiency in English (Sham *et al.*, 2022). It can lead to decreased support for school-based traditional music education, which makes it more difficult for teachers to maintain such programs. Solving these issues involves concerted action on the part of various stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Education, teacher education schools, cultural institutions, and community groups. These might include money for individual instruments, curriculum revision to ensure equitable representation of culture, and teacher education programs that equip teachers with the skill and confidence to teach in multiple traditions.

These obstacles clearly block the curriculum's greater aim of promoting cultural identity, as

diminished support and resources constrain students' opportunity to connect closely with their heritage via music.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This research used a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) based on the PRISMA guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). A qualitative SLR was used because it facilitates combining intricate, context-bound results of multiple studies—a key aspect while analyzing cultural and pedagogical concerns that may remain unobserved without qualitative data (Zufriady et al., 2024). This approach is particularly appropriate for exploring how curriculum policies affect the teaching and representation of traditional music because it allows the researcher to synthesize thematic details and perspectives from the literature.

Compared to a selective narrative review, using a systematic approach makes the search, screening, and selection phases clear, reproducible, and free from bias (Siddaway, Wood & Hedges, 2019). In focusing on qualitative research and thick description, this review biases towards rich description rather than extensive statistical generalizations. Through this method, it provides a deeper understanding of how cultural identity is developed through music education in Malaysian primary schools.

3.2. PRISMA Framework

The PRISMA framework was adopted to ensure rigour and clarity in the review process. PRISMA provides a standardised structure for reporting systematic reviews, **consisting of four sequential stages**

1. Identification – Locating potentially relevant studies through systematic database searches.
2. Screening – Reviewing titles and abstracts to remove duplicates and clearly irrelevant studies.
3. Eligibility – Assessing full-text articles against inclusion and exclusion criteria.
4. Inclusion – Final selection of studies that meet all criteria for qualitative synthesis.

Following this structured sequence ensures that each step of the review process is documented, reducing the likelihood of selection bias and enhancing the reproducibility of the study (Page et al., 2021).

3.3. Search Strategy

In order to ensure broad coverage of appropriate literature, five principal academic databases were consulted: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. They were chosen for their scope, inclusion of peer-reviewed education and culture research and both regional and global journals.

The search terms were developed to capture the key elements of the research topic

- “traditional music”
- “cultural identity”
- “music curriculum”
- “Malaysia”
- “primary school”
- “heritage education”

Boolean operators and truncation were applied to narrow down the search (e.g., "traditional music" AND "Malaysia" AND "primary school"), ensuring focus on studies that were pertinent to the Malaysian setting and primary-level music education. The initial search included publications between 2019 and 2025, offering a 7-year bracket to cover recent advances in curriculum policy and practice.

3.4. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1: Caption.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time Frame	2019–2025	Before 2019
Language	English	Non-English without translation
Source Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Grey literature, conference abstracts
Relevance	Malaysian primary school curriculum, traditional music, cultural identity	Studies outside Malaysia or without focus on primary level
Methodology	Qualitative or mixed-methods with qualitative findings	Purely quantitative
Full Text Access	Available	Abstract-only

3.5. Study Selection

The search process yielded 62 records across the five databases. After removing duplicates, 54 unique studies remained. These were screened by title and abstract, resulting in the exclusion of 19 studies that did not meet the relevance criteria—either because they focused on secondary or tertiary education, addressed music genres unrelated to traditional Malaysian music, or examined cultural identity outside an educational context.

The remaining 35 studies underwent full-text review against the inclusion and exclusion criteria. During this stage, a further 27 studies were excluded for reasons such as

- Quantitative-only methodology without qualitative findings.
- Lack of focus on Malaysian primary education.
- Absence of specific discussion on traditional music or cultural identity.

This process resulted in 8 studies being included in the final synthesis. These studies represented a range of qualitative approaches, including case studies, ethnographic observations, and interview-based research, providing a rich source of data for thematic analysis.

3.6. Data Extraction and Analysis

Data extraction was conducted systematically using a predesigned extraction form. For each study, the following information was recorded

- Author(s) and year of publication.
- Research aims and context.
- Methodology and participants.
- Key findings relevant to curriculum content, pedagogical approaches, and cultural identity outcomes.
- Notable recommendations or implications for practice.

The extracted data were then subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase framework

1. Familiarisation with the data – Multiple readings of each study to gain an overall understanding.
2. Generating initial codes – Identifying recurring concepts, issues, and observations.
3. Searching for themes – Grouping codes into broader thematic categories.
4. Reviewing themes – Refining themes for coherence and distinctiveness.
5. Defining and naming themes – Clearly

articulating the essence of each theme.

6. Producing the report – Integrating themes into the findings section with supporting evidence from the literature.

Manual coding was preferred over automated software to allow closer engagement with the text and ensure culturally nuanced interpretations, enabling the researcher to detect subtle themes, contextual meanings, and culturally specific expressions that automated tools might overlook. The thematic analysis yielded three overarching themes: (1) traditional music as a vehicle for cultural identity, (2) pedagogical strategies in curriculum standards, and (3) alignment and gaps between policy and practice.

The use of thematic synthesis allowed for the integration of findings from diverse studies while retaining the contextual richness of each. This approach ensured that the analysis captured not only what is prescribed in curriculum documents but also how these prescriptions are experienced and interpreted by educators, students, and communities.

4. RESULTS

The final synthesis drew on eight qualitative studies that together provide a well-rounded picture of how traditional music is positioned within the Malaysian primary school curriculum and the extent to which it supports cultural identity. These studies span perspectives from indigenous music traditions, teacher readiness, pedagogical innovation, and culturally sustaining frameworks. Three major themes emerged from the analysis: traditional music as a vehicle for cultural identity, pedagogical approaches outlined in curriculum standards, and the gaps between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Table 1 summarises the focus areas and key findings of these studies.

Table 2: Overview of Selected Studies.

Authors	Year	Focus Area	Key Findings
Abdullah, M. H., Sulong, M. A., Nasrifan, M. N., Arshad, S. F., & Ramli, N. A. M.	2024	Indigenous music traditions in Sabah	Bertitik and Mongigol-Sumundai foster cultural pride and reflect social cooperation within communities.
Sham, N. S. N., Ismail, M. J., & Sim, Y. E.	2022	Societal perceptions of music education	Parents often undervalue music compared to STEM, limiting support for traditional music in schools.
Shah, S.	2021	Evolution of Malay gamelan	The gamelan's shift from court to classroom highlights both opportunities and risks of cultural continuity.
Simeon, J. J. C., & Pugh-Kitingan, J.	2021	Indigenous children's songs in education	Introducing Rungus songs strengthens cultural identity and engages students with heritage narratives.
Southcott, J., & Liao, V.	2022	Music ensembles and identity	Ensemble participation builds community bonds, showing how group performance fosters unity.
Ong, P.	2025	Creative teaching materials in Malaysia	Locally designed resources make traditional music education more engaging and culturally relevant.
Min, I., & Abdullah, M. H. B.	2024	Teacher readiness for multicultural music education	Teachers value multicultural content but lack confidence and training to teach traditional forms.
Mena, C., & Campbell, P. S.	2024	Culturally sustaining pedagogy	Encourages evolving traditional forms through creative processes, linking heritage with contemporary practice.

4.1. Theme 1: Traditional Music as a Vehicle for Cultural Identity

Across the reviewed studies, traditional music emerged as a central force for nurturing pride in heritage and connecting students to Malaysia's multicultural identity. Abdullah et al. (2024) highlighted how indigenous forms such as Bertitik and Mongigol-Sumundai not only represent regional identities in Sabah but also embody values of resilience and cooperation. Similarly, Simeon and Pugh-Kitingan (2021) demonstrated the educational value of introducing Rungus children's songs into classrooms, showing that students not only learned musical skills but also engaged with the cultural narratives embedded in the repertoire.

Shah (2021) traced the evolving role of the Malay gamelan, once confined to court settings but now increasingly part of the school curriculum, emphasising its potential to reinforce a sense of continuity with tradition. Together, these studies illustrate how diverse musical traditions allow students to see themselves as part of a shared yet plural heritage. International work by Southcott and Liao (2022) further supports this view, showing how ensemble participation fosters community identity across different cultural contexts, a principle applicable to Malaysia's plural society.

4.2. Theme 2: Pedagogical Approaches in Curriculum Standards

The curriculum expects participatory methods like singing, moving, and playing in an ensemble, yet the studies under review indicate that effectiveness depends on teacher preparation. Ong (2025) emphasized the need for culturally responsive teaching materials, demonstrating how innovative resources with local contexts in consideration serve to address the policy-practice gap. Min and Abdullah (2024) further posited that although instructors recognize the importance of multicultural music education, most feel uncertain and lack training in teaching anything other than Western traditions, frequently resorting to comfortable repertoires.

Concurrently, Mena and Campbell (2024) developed the concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy wherein teaching practices within the classrooms do not just maintain heritage but enable it to grow in productive ways. Their research emphasizes composition and creative practices that empower students to recreate traditional forms in new settings. Together, these formulations strengthen the position that pedagogy has to shift beyond token exposure to one that promotes active

and creative encounters with heritage forms.

4.3. Theme 3: Alignment and Gaps in Implementation

The Malaysian policy context is ambitious, challenges in implementation continue to be an ongoing issue. Sham, Ismail, and Sim (2022) identified that societal attitudes can impede music education, as parents and communities often value other subjects perceived to be more economically relevant than music. This support shortfall can limit the scalability of music programmes rooted in tradition.

Other research identified uneven cultural diversity and resource discrepancies. Sabah and Sarawak indigenous repertoires, although a focus in curriculum objectives, remain less represented in teaching practice than Malay ones (Simeon & Pugh-Kitingan, 2021; Abdullah et al., 2024). Teachers' limited courses in local music reinforce the disparity (Min & Abdullah, 2024). Shah (2021) further observed that without sustained investment in teacher training and resources, customs such as gamelan may be taught superficially or in watered-down form.

Together, these results indicate that although Malaysia's curriculum creates a good foundation for music-based cultural identity formation, its application is inconsistent. Ongoing teacher development, provision of resources, and more effective community collaboration are needed to fill the gap between intention and implementation.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings highlight both the potential benefits and the challenges of integrating traditional music into Malaysia's primary school curriculum. By synthesizing eight key studies alongside supporting references, the review identified three main themes: (1) traditional music as an expression of cultural identity, (2) the pedagogical ideologies that shape its classroom implementation, and (3) gaps between policy and practice in bringing traditional music into schools. This discussion places these conclusions within broader scholarship, reflects on their implications for Malaysian music education, and identifies where further action is needed.

5.1. Traditional Music and the Formation of Cultural Identity

The results strongly suggest that traditional music is more than just a taste practice; it is a means of carrying heritage, identity, and belongingness. Abdullah et al. (2024) made this a point by showing how Bertitik and Mongigol-Sumundai each capture

Sabah's Bajau Samah and Rungus people's social formations and cultural stories. When integrated into classroom environments, these genres enable children to experience music not as disembodied information, but as a vibrant embodiment of cultural heritage. Likewise, Simeon and Pugh-Kitingan (2021) demonstrated that the integration of Rungus children's songs reinforces learners' engagement in indigenous traditions and builds a real bridge between school and community life. This discovery echoes Shah's (2021) research into the gamelan, in which the gradual change from courtly practice to school repertoire demonstrates how music traditions evolve to stay current. Schools, instead of fossilising a heritage, can situate traditional music as a vibrant component of cultural continuity. This is supported by the wider view of Joseph and Southcott (2015), that traditional music generates pride and togetherness in multicultural environments. On this account, music education is a means of promoting intercultural understanding and national cohesion.

However, the representation of traditions in the curriculum varies. Malay repertoires such as *dikir barat*, gamelan, and *kompang* are more explicitly detailed in the curriculum examples, whereas indigenous traditions from Sabah and Sarawak are mentioned more generally. This selective focus threatens to build the illusion of tokenistic inclusion unless underpinned by greater engagement with all traditions. Community participation is at this point a pivotal consideration. Sunderland *et al.* (2024), their work on intergenerational transmission of music among indigenous peoples, demonstrates how working with elders and cultural guardians supports learning in the classroom while preserving authenticity. Transposing such strategies into Malaysia could promote equilibrium of representation by guaranteeing that several cultural streams make meaningful contributions to the curriculum.

5.2. Pedagogical Approaches and Curriculum Standards

The second dominant theme focuses on pedagogy. Malaysia's curriculum promotes active music-making—singing, movement, and ensemble playing—but successful adoption hinges on teacher confidence and resources. Ong (2025) noted that locally developed teaching materials can fill this gap, especially when they resonate with students' cultural lives. In the absence of these resources, teachers might resort to imported or Westernised repertoires, undermining traditional forms unintentionally.

Teacher preparedness is a persistent problem.

Min and Abdullah (2024) reported that although teachers prefer multicultural content, few have adequate training to teach traditional music with confidence. This is supported by Colquhoun's (2019) wider conclusions regarding teacher preparedness for non-traditional ensembles, which is that without professional development, curriculum intentions never make it into effective practice. Shah (2021) further supplemented that introducing traditions such as gamelan into schools not just demands technical proficiency but cultural contextual awareness; otherwise, the music is likely to be taught in a superficial manner. Progressive pedagogical strategies can mitigate this likelihood. Mena and Campbell (2024) make a case for culturally sustaining pedagogy, whereby heritage forms are not just conserved but reinterpreted so as to resonate with students today. Such approaches nudge students to participate imaginatively in customary music, combining respect for authenticity and scope for innovation. This view supports Ong's (2025) application for creative resources for the curriculum, identifying a model in which tradition and creativity interact in supporting relationships.

International examples also support these results. Southcott and Liao (2022) illustrated how ensemble membership creates a sense of identity and belonging in diverse cultural contexts. By using equivalent principles, Malaysian classrooms could frame ensemble work as musical practice and social practice, affirming unity in diversity. Additionally, Opoku and James (2021), when referring to South Africa, underscored the fact that decolonisation of curricula involves a conscious pedagogical transformation, rather than the integration of heritage materials. In the case of Malaysia, this implies that integrating traditional music involves continuous teacher education, curriculum assistance, and assessment frameworks that appreciate cultural as much as technical outputs.

5.3. Alignment and Gaps in Implementation

With a policy environment that promotes traditional music, there remain considerable gaps between policy intent and classroom practice. Sham *et al.* (2022) identified that societal attitudes are a prime determinant, with parents downplaying the value of music education compared to the STEM subjects. Not only does this determine student engagement but also how schools distribute resources. Downplaying the value of music captures what Rahman *et al.* (2021) term systemic obstacles that constrain the actualization of curricular intent, especially where schools have limited resources.

Inequities in resources are also a long-standing problem. A study by Xuan and Haris (2025) has shown that schools face significant inequities in music education, with extremely poor access to instruments, education, and learning materials. This echoes the broader educational inequity in Malaysia. For traditional styles such as those documented by Abdullah et al. (2024) and Simeon and Pugh-Kitingan (2021), this imbalance has severe repercussions: the groups most directly linked with these traditions tend to be the least able to transmit them via state education. Shortcomings in teacher education compound these issues. Min and Abdullah (2024) highlighted that the vast majority of educators, while keen on multicultural music education, feel themselves poorly prepared to teach traditional styles. This imbalance reflects broader structural issues in teacher education programs, which prefer Western classical or pop repertoires. If revolutions are not instituted that officially incorporate local traditions into teacher education, the underrepresentation cycle is bound to repeat itself.

Lastly, curriculum alignment is inconstant. While policies are encouraging multiculturalism, execution tends to favour dominant cultural narratives. Without careful effort in balancing representation, mainstream music from minority communities is at risk of marginalisation. Intervention studies, including those proposed by future research in Sham et al. (2022), can offer routes for piloting culturally enriched pedagogy in practice.

5.4. Implications for Policy and Practice

Taken collectively, these results indicate a number of implications. First, policy interventions need to go beyond symbolic inclusion towards ongoing structural support. This entails not just curricular declarations but also funding for teacher training, teaching materials, and assessment schemes that prioritize cultural outcomes. Second, partnerships with communities need to be enhanced. Following Sunderland et al. (2024), involving elders, cultural practitioners, and community groups in classroom practice can increase authenticity and representation. Third, people's attitudes must change. Parents and awareness campaigns might help reorient music as a valuable topic for cultural enrichment rather than an extracurricular activity.

For pedagogical practice, instructors can be urged to embrace culturally sustaining practices (Mena & Campbell, 2024) that integrate tradition and innovation. Ensemble-based approaches through collaborative ensemble, as proposed by Southcott and Liao (2022), may also cultivate identity and

cohesion in learning spaces. Professional development programs should, as a priority, familiarize teachers with technical and cultural competency in traditional repertoires so that they may instruct beyond superficial exposure.

5.5. Limitations of Current Evidence

Limitations in the studies reviewed need to be acknowledged. Most available research uses qualitative or case-study methods, with small sample sizes. Whilst useful for rich, context-rich information, these limit generalisability. Additionally, as Snyder (2019) highlights, qualitative synthesis may identify subtle patterns but is unable to describe fully systemic effects without supporting quantitative evidence. Subsequent research may use mixed-methods or longitudinal approaches to determine the long-term effect of integrating traditional music on students' formation of cultural identity.

5.6. Broader Reflections

The introduction of traditional music in Malaysian primary schools can be viewed as part of a global process to decolonise and localise curricula. To a large extent, the problems witnessed in Malaysia reflect the problems encountered elsewhere: under-preparation of teachers, devaluation of the arts by society, and conflicts between maintaining authenticity and fostering creativity. Malaysia's multicultural environment does offer special opportunities. Through intentional policy, inclusive pedagogy, and more robust community-school relationships, traditional music can act not just as heritage retention but also as a medium for promoting unity and imagination in an increasingly globalized world.

6. CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to understand how traditional music is included in Malaysia's primary school curriculum and the role it plays in strengthening cultural identity. Eight recent studies show that traditional music education holds great promise: it can deepen students' connection to their heritage, promote harmony in a multicultural society, and strengthen links between schools and communities. However, these benefits are often undermined by gaps in teacher preparation, limited resources, and curriculum misalignment.

Above all, traditional music is a powerful way to build cultural identity. For instance, the Bertitik and Mongigol-Sumundai dances of Sabah, the Rungus children's folk songs, and the evolving role of the Malay gamelan are not merely classroom activities – they are living traditions with deep social and

historical significance (Abdullah et al., 2024; Simeon & Pugh-Kitingan, 2021; Shah, 2021). When such music is taught in schools, it does more than impart musical skills; it connects children with their people's history, instills pride, and shapes their sense of self. This underscores that including traditional culture in the curriculum is not just symbolic – it is essential for building national unity.

At the same time, achieving this vision requires creative teaching methods and robust support for educators. Ong (2025) and Min and Abdullah (2024) emphasize the need for contextualized teaching materials and comprehensive teacher training so that educators can confidently teach traditional repertoires. Without such support, traditional music may be taught superficially or replaced by Westernized models. Adopting culturally sustaining practices (Mena & Campbell, 2024) is one way to address this issue, as these practices encourage teachers to balance authenticity with creativity. This approach allows students to remain connected to their heritage while actively engaging with it.

Despite progressive policies on paper, a disconnect remains between curriculum guidelines and actual classroom practice. Even though official reports promote multiculturalism, deep-seated

attitudes in society continue to undervalue music education. This mismatch weakens the impact of well-intended curriculum goals and risks sidelining the very traditions that should be celebrated. If these structural barriers are not addressed, the promise of music as a unifying cultural force will only be partially realized. Second, tighter collaboration with communities, cultural practitioners, and elders is required to uphold authenticity and equitable representation throughout the diverse traditions of Malaysia. Third, an end is necessitated to the historical devaluation of music education within the broader system of education and society.

In summary, traditional music in Malaysia's primary schools is at the crossroads. It has the potential to foster culturally rooted, socially integrated citizens but is hampered by barriers that restrict its extent and depth. Overcoming these obstacles calls for concerted action by educators, policymakers, communities, and families. If all these stakeholders could collaborate to integrate traditional music more purposefully into the curriculum, Malaysia is not just able to preserve its heritage but also develop future generations who appreciate diversity, creativity, and shared cultural identity.

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